

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY

## English 387

Spring 2011  
MWF 11am-11:50pm  
Pardee 102B  
1 Unit

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In the early twentieth century, poets such as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot saw their work as making a radical break from the ‘genteel’ past of nineteenth-century poetry. As we will see in this course, however, the gentility that Pound and Eliot noted in their predecessors’ works appeared alongside personal expression, public declaration, political furor, and formal imitation and experimentation—many of the dynamics of poetry that are considered valuable in modern literature. Yet the history that surrounds nineteenth-century poetry is what stands most between us and the poems we will read here. It’s difficult at first glance to understand why Whitman was a fringe writer embraced only by elites, while the wealthy and learned Longfellow commanded the hearts and memories of even semi-literate readers. How were these poems written, published, and received? What makes them work, and what can we learn of poetry through studying them? We will pursue these questions over the coming weeks as a way of joining reception and performance together—whether critically, creatively, or both.

### REQUIRED TEXTS

*NCP* Hollander, *American Poetry of the Nineteenth Century* (Library of America) College ed.  
*SPL* Longfellow, *Selected Poems* (Penguin)  
*CPW* Walt Whitman, *Complete Poems* (Penguin)  
*MRF* Philip Hobsbaum, *Metre, Rhythm, & Verse Form* (Routledge)

Additional readings will be provided on the course’s Moodle site.

### COURSE GOALS

By the end of the course, students should:

1. Build on their skills in analyzing, responding to, and writing about literature, while developing skills in performing literary works for other readers.
2. Understand a range of the historical contexts, forms, and critical discourses of earlier American poetry.
3. Use a variety of electronic and print resources for research in the history of poetry and poets.
4. Use memorization, written close reading, oral performance, and discussion as interdependent modes of criticism.

## ASSIGNMENTS

### **Research Projects** (40% of total)

During the semester you will undertake two research projects, each producing a 4-5pp. (plus bibliography) essay in MLA style and undergoing one major revision in connection with an individual conference with me. The first will involve choosing one of the poets that will serve as a focus in the course; any author whose name appears by itself on our course schedule (see below) is a valid subject. The goals of this assignment are to introduce you to the process of doing research on canonical figures in American poetry and to give you preparation for studying these authors later in the course. This essay will be due in draft form Friday, February 11, and the final version will be due Monday, March 7. The second research project will take you into less charted territory, as you will focus on a poet who is not on our reading list (though the poet may be in our anthology). The goals of this assignment are to help you learn and reflect on the different methods involved in studying less-known authors, and to help you and your classmates learn about a wider range of poetry for your performed readings than we would be able to study together as a class. This essay will be due in draft form Friday, April 1 and the final version will be due Friday, April 15.

### **Periodical Poetry Exercise** (10% of total)

One of the richest resources for studying 19th-c. American poetry is periodicals from the period, where most of the publication happened, even for the most famous poets. This assignment will guide you through the use of periodicals in research in both paper and digital formats. Using the database *American Periodical Series Online* as well as other resources in Skillman Library, you will learn how to locate poems in a range of different sources, and write a 2-3pp. essay describing what you found and reflecting on your process in conducting the research. This essay will be due by class time on Monday, February 14.

### **Performed Readings** (20% of total)

Beyond the research projects, your graded writing in this course will connect to oral performance of the poetry we're studying. Through a series of "lab sessions," you will learn to record yourself reading and edit the audio files before uploading them to iTunes U (only our class will have access to the files). In connection with our lab sessions, you will make recordings of three different poems, one of which you will recite from memory, and one of which will be peer reviewed by your classmates. Your recordings will be uploaded in mp3 format, and you will also submit a 1-2pp. close reading of your poem on Moodle, with a brief paragraph describing how your reading of the poem informed your performance of it (or vice versa). Due dates will be on the forthcoming assignment prompts.

### **Audio Anthology** (30% of total)

The truest criticism is usually performance, as many critics and writers have pointed out. This is especially true of pre-1900 literature, and a key part of understanding the poetry we study in this course is learning how to read it well. To guide you through that process, the major project of this course will be creating an individual portfolio of recorded readings of poems from our class

texts. The final portfolio will include no fewer than five recordings (one from memory, and at least one re-recorded from an earlier reading), each of a different poem or excerpt from a poem and accompanied by a 1-2pp. close reading of the poem. You will also write a 2-3pp. essay in which you briefly explain your approach to poetry performance and describe the choices you made in performing individual poems. The recordings will be uploaded to iTunes U in mp3 format. The final portfolio is due by 5pm on Wednesday, May 11.

A few words about grading policy:

- While I do not set aside a portion of your grade for attendance or participation in this class, the interactive nature of our class time together with my excellent memory will help me know who is here and who is not. Frequent tardiness or absence will harm your grade, both directly and indirectly. In a seminar, we must all be present, physically and mentally, for us to get the maximum benefit out of our work together. My responsibility is to prepare and lead classes that create an environment friendly to learning; your job is to learn. When you do that, I often learn with you and from you, and that's one of the thrills of being a professor. So please, for all our sakes, be prepared and show up on time!
- Late work will be penalized one letter grade for every day beyond the due date. The first day past the due date starts one hour after assignments are due.
- I calculate grades based on the point system used for GPA on your Lafayette transcript. Thus, an A=4, an A-=3.7, B+=3.3, and so on. F counts as a 0.
- If you wish to contest a grade, you must do the following: 1.) wait 24 hours after you have received the graded assignment, 2.) write and send me a brief argument as to why I should reconsider your grade, and 3.) come see me in person to discuss what you wrote. Keep in mind that if I decide to reconsider the grade, you may wind up with a lower grade than you had before.

A brief word on using texts in your own writing:

Be sure to cite page numbers when you quote or refer to literary works, and cite quotations or ideas that you get from other sources in MLA style—this is both a matter of academic ethics and a helpful practice that lets your readers follow where your attention and your influences lie. For the college's policy on academic honesty, please see <http://www.lafayette.edu/academics/honesty.pdf>.

In compliance with Lafayette College policy and equal access laws, I am available to discuss appropriate academic accommodations that you may require as a student with a disability.

Requests for academic accommodations need to be made during the first two weeks of the semester, except for unusual circumstances, so arrangements can be made. Students must register with the Office of the Dean of the College for disability verification and for determination of reasonable academic accommodations.

## SCHEDULE

Week 1: 19th-c. Conversations About (and in) Poetry

**M:** Introduction      **W:** “The Prairies”      **F:** Sonnets

Week 2: Popular Poetic Forms of the 19th century

**M:** Hymns      **W:** Ballads      **F:** Poe and Emerson on Poetry

Week 3: The Place of Romanticism in American Poetry

**M:** Poe, Whitman      **W:** Emerson      **F:** LAB #1 (Poems in Conversation)

Week 4: Women’s Poetry(?)

**M:** LIBRARY DAY      **W:** Sigourney      **F:** Brooks, Lazarus, Piatt

Week 5: Public Poetries

**M:** Epideictic poems      **W:** Abolitionist poetry      **F:** Civil War poetry

Week 6: The oral sources of American poetry

**M:** Folk poetry      **W:** Native American poetry & spirituals      **F:** NO CLASS

Week 7: The Schoolroom Poets

**M:** PAPER DAY      **W:** Robson (on Moodle), Woodworth      **F:** Longfellow

Week 8: SPRING BREAK—NO CLASS

Week 9: Longfellow’s American Legends

**M:** *Evangeline*, pt. 1      **W:** *Evangeline*, pt. 2      **F:** *Hiawatha*, “Divina Commedia”

Week 10: Whitman: Emerson’s Poet?

**M:** “Song of Myself” (1855 version)      **W:** from *Calamus* and *Enfans d’Adam*      **F:** LAB #2

Week 11: Whitman’s Long Career

**M:** “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” “Out of the Cradle”      **W:** from *Drum-Taps*      **F:** late lyrics

Week 12: Melville’s Other Career

**M:** Melville, *Battle-Pieces*      **W:** Melville, later poems      **F:** PAPER DAY

Week 13: From Singing Birds to America Singing

**M:** Dickinson I      **W:** Dickinson II      **F:** LAB #3

Week 14: New Poetries for the *fin de siècle*

**M:** Dickinson III      **W:** Dunbar      **F:** Lanier

Week 15: The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls

**M:** Crane      **W:** Harrington on literary history (on Moodle)      **F:** Wrap-up

NB: See Moodle for specific readings for each day. This schedule is subject to change.